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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000798

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DEPARTMENT FOR SRAP, SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM  
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SUBJECT: PROVINCIAL-LEVEL ELECTION POLITICKING

Classified By: PRT and Sub-National Governance Director Valerie C. Fowler for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

#### Summary

1. (C) A review of provincial-level election preparations indicates that in most provinces politicking is not yet underway, with many officials indicating they do not expect such activity to jump into high gear until June. Support for President Karzai appears soft, with many governors hedging their bets, should another serious candidate emerge. Many governors indicate they are looking for the United States to signal which candidate it supports, with the expectation the U.S. candidate will win the election. Political activity to date has tended toward the typical perks of incumbency, with governors giving President Karzai credit for internationally funded development projects. Governor Sherzai in Nangahar has used his influence to ensure positive local media coverage, including employing the lead anchor for the local RTA television channel as his media spokesman. Other candidates are establishing offices and building support, with activities by Former Interior Minister Jalali most in evidence. Additionally, many officials seem unaware that Provincial Council elections will be held concurrently with Presidential elections.

#### Karzai Support is Soft

2. (SBU) A recent review of election preparations and politicking by our Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) officers highlights some general trends relating to provincial-level election activities. President Karzai, the clear front-runner, has strong support from several of his appointed governors, including Governor Wahidi in Kunar, Governor Mashal in Laghman, Governor Usmani in Ghazni, and Governor Abu Baker in Kapisa. Some are pressing Karzai's candidacy through the usual perks of incumbency, such as holding ceremonies that credit him with completion of development projects. However, reporting also suggests that Karzai's popular support has been deeply undermined by his perceived corruption and failure to deliver on development promises. This view is reflected in the more cautious support of a number of Karzai-appointed governors who might otherwise be expected to publicly support the President's reelection. For example, Governor Kataway of Paktya has done little to prepare media activities, reflecting his wariness to show too much public support for Karzai should a different candidate emerge.

#### Helmand's Mangal Being Pressed Hard to Support Karzai

3. (C) With an alternative to Karzai having failed to yet emerge, the election is probably far more complicated than Helmand Governor Mangal and other Helmand tribal leaders expected. PRT officer was told by members of the Helmand Provincial Council, Ministry line directors, and area residents that President Karzai is maintaining a broad effort to corral allies in the province in support of his

re-election, including reports that he is involving Helmand strong man Rais Baghrani in this effort. Members of the Provincial Council said that Governor Mangal is being lobbied or pressured by President Karzai,s brother and Kandahar Provincial Council chair Ahmed Walli Karzai on a regular basis. They also confirmed that influential people, including tribal and civil leaders, were contacted by the President,s office to rally behind him and be part of a perceived new reconciliation push in Helmand. Comment: The efforts to use the reconciliation effort for campaigning is the most complicated and perilous avenue of this electioneering effort, which could result in local officials being left with the blame should deals with mid-level enemy commanders be made and fall through. End Comment.

14. (C) As a result of this sustained pressure on Mangal, he convened a meeting on March 25 with Tribal Elders to encourage their support for Karzai. At the same time, Mangal, who is associated with the Afghan Mellat (Afghan Social Democratic Party), is quietly promoting the efforts of his party in Helmand. The end result is that Mangal's public and private efforts are disappointing all sides, including distancing him from Lashkar Gah,s large Hazara community which wants changes at the national level. Comment: Mangal is an exceptional politician but he may be in a position well beyond his control with too many sides expecting him to carry their cause. He will undoubtedly have to damage relations with various factions to satisfy others and this could weaken his ability to support stabilization and governance efforts in Helmand. End Comment.

Governor Sherzai Pulling the Strings in Nangahar

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15. (SBU) Governor Sherzai has held a number of highly publicized shuras in Jalalabad with tribal leaders and prominent politicians from all over Afghanistan, discussing national rather than provincial issues. These events are viewed by locals as unofficial election campaign events. Additionally, he has used his influence to ensure positive local media coverage. His media spokesman is the lead anchor for the local RTA television channel and he keeps daytime office hours at the Governor,s palace, along with a cameraman who is on call for the governor. Not surprisingly, there is a distinct lack of pro-Karzai media coverage on the local RTA channel. Beyond Nangahar, however, there is little visible sign from PRT reports of Sherzai,s political activities, with the exception of Herat where reportedly his people are trying to line up political party support for his candidacy.

Other Candidates

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16. (SBU) While most election reporting centers around Karzai, and he remains the only universally well-known candidate among Afghans, other candidates are preparing to run whether as serious contenders (at least in their own minds) or as a means to position themselves for one of the two vice president slots or other senior positions. For example, in Kapisa the Pashtun bloc does not yet have a candidate but is looking at former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah. Former Interior Minister Jalali and his people have reportedly opened an election office in the Tagab District of Kapisa; begun laying the groundwork in the north for his candidacy; rented two houses in Herat as a means to reach out to influential people in the city; and opened discussions with the Jamiat party in Faryab related to posts for its members if they support Jalali. In Panjshir, the United Front (UF) enjoys a clear political advantage and there is keen interest in potential UF candidacies of Vice President Massoud or former Defense Minister Marshal Fahim, with support appearing to solidify around Massoud. Junbesh party leaders have been busy mobilizing supporters in Balkh and other nearby provinces but have not yet selected a candidate; securing a VP slot for an ethnic Uzbek could be

worth the price of supporting Karzai.

#### Watching Khalilzad

17. (C) Despite former U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad,s statements that he will not run, his activities and those of his supporters are watched carefully by the political class. Governor Weesa of Kandahar saw the recent Dubai meeting as an attempt by Khalilzad to persuade opposition figures to withdraw their candidacy to unite behind one candidate. Herat politicians similarly speculated on the meeting, seeing the hand of the U.S. Government trying to rally support around Khalilzad,s candidacy. On March 28, a rally was held in a stadium in Helmand,s Lashkar Gah attended by roughly 100 men calling themselves tribal elders who announced their support for Khalilzad,s candidacy. A security officer later told the PRT that he believed a group from Nangahar was in the demonstration. This event followed on an event the previous week in Nangahar that was reportedly not well attended.

#### What Provincial Council Elections?

18. (SBU) In most provinces, the fact that the August 20 elections will also decide Provincial Council members is a source of confusion. Several senior officials, including one governor, even disputed assertions by the PRT that these elections would also take place on August 20. Comment: The International Election Commission's (IEC) civic education program is scheduled to kick off in the provinces on May 21. The ambitious campaign that includes radio and television spots, call center availability, text messaging and seminars for local leaders as only a few of their strategies, should increase provincial awareness. End Comment.  
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